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THE ILLUMINATING POWER OF ANECDOTE.

BY S. ARTHUR BENT.

A WRITER of the last century thought to discredit anecdotes by calling them "the luxuries of literature." According to his definition they merely gratify the love of intellectual indolence by their conciseness, while they feed the appetite for novelty by their infinite variety. As, however, the human element has become more prominent in historical composition, the biographies of individuals are as important to the student as the archives of a department of state. "Biography," says Carlyle, "is the only true history," and anecdote is of the essence of biography.

While the introduction of the personal element into historic narrative deepens the impression of events which the historian wishes to make in the reader's mind, the absence of this element divests history of its human aspect, and reduces it to a dry, uninteresting, and, therefore, uninformative statement of facts. Thus Hume closes his account of the reign of Charles II. by saying that in the midst of wise and virtuous designs concerning Scotland, the King was seized with a sudden fit resembling apoplexy, and, after languishing a few days, died, having shown himself indifferent to the exhortations of the Protestant clergy, finally receiving the sacraments from a Catholic priest. Contrast this bald statement of an important historic event with Macaulay's brilliant description of the appearance of the court on the eve of the King's attack, a Sunday night, when grave persons who had gone thither to pay their respects to their sovereign were struck with astonishment and horror as they saw the great gallery of Whitehall crowded with revellers, among whom sat the King, chatting and toying with his favorites, while a French page warbled amorous verses, and courtiers were seated at tables "on which the gold was heaped in mountains." And thus, throughout the terrible scenes of the monarch's illness, the historian deepens, by graphic details, the impression he wishes to make of

the profligacy of the reign of the royal pensioner of France, while through the gloom pierce rays of the King's "exquisite urbanity," last glimpses of which are his apologies to his attendants for the trouble he had caused them, having been an unconscionable time dying, which he hoped they would excuse.

So well is this anecdotal necessity understood by modern historians that possibly the less scrupulous or more imaginative among them "have drawn on their imagination for their facts." Take, for instance, the pathetic incident known as "the last night of the Girondists." Thiers, in his history of the French Revolution, is the first to describe the twenty-one victims of the Terror taking a last meal together, "at which they were by turns merry, serious, and eloquent. Their leader, Vergniaud, spoke of expiring liberty in the noblest terms of regret, Ducos repeated verses which he had composed in prison, and they all joined in singing hymns to France and liberty." In the hands of the poetic Lamartine this simple repast becomes a feast of Lucullus with "the daintiest meats, the choicest wines, the rarest flowers, and numerous *flambeaux*, the luxury of the last farewell, the prodigality of dying men, who have nothing to save for the next day." The nephew of one of the Girondists unnecessarily protests against lending to them a sensuality that was neither in their habits nor to their tastes,—unnecessarily, because no such meal, repast, or banquet took place; for their companion, Riouffe, who passed the night with them and survived them, says that, when they returned to prison at a late hour from the tribunal where they had been condemned to perish the next morning, "they passed all this frightful night in singing patriotic songs, only interrupted by talk of the country or by a sally of Ducos."

No biographer can afford to neglect the illustration and anecdotes of everyday life, for they may serve his purpose more successfully than the most elaborate analysis. Without the use of anecdote it is, therefore, impossible to attempt biography, and when a biographer mentions a peculiar characteristic, an anecdote may justify his statement and confirm its accuracy. Thus one may read that Adam Smith was remarkably absent-minded. No one will doubt this when told that once having to sign his name to an official document the great economist produced, not his own signature, but an elaborate imitation of the signature of the person who signed before him; and that,

on another occasion, a sentinel on duty having saluted him in military style was astonished to see him acknowledge it by an awkward copy of the same gestures. Busch, the Boswellian biographer of Bismarck, says that the Chancellor is of a choleric disposition. The least vexation is liable to provoke him to volcanic outbursts of temper, but the eruption rapidly subsides. He tells no confirmatory anecdotes, but Count Beust comes to his rescue, saying in his "Memoirs" that Bismarck once left the Emperor's apartment in a rage, and, finding that he was carrying by accident the key with him, he threw it into a basin in a friend's room, and broke the basin into fragments. "Are you ill?" asked the occupant of the room. "I was," replied Bismarck, "but I am better now." His passionate outbursts stand in strong contrast with Moltke's imperturbable coolness, which is well illustrated by the story in which Bismarck himself tells that, at a critical moment of the battle of Sadowa, he offered the great strategist a cigar, and Moltke carefully selected the best one in the case. Bismarck says he took comfort in thinking that if the great general was calm enough to make a choice of this kind, things could not be going so very badly with them.

Who has not heard of Macaulay's insatiate love of reading and of the prodigious memory which enabled him to pour forth at will the vast treasures of his learning? We appreciate the former when told that during his childhood, from the age of three years, he read incessantly, for the most part lying on the rug before the fire, with the book on the floor and a piece of bread and butter in his hand. It was hardly necessary for his biographer to add that he did not care for toys. He who speaks of Macaulay's prodigious learning and memory may single out the following anecdote from the many which illustrate it: Lady Holland, to puzzle him, once said: "Pray, sir, what was the origin of a doll? Where are dolls first mentioned in history?" To which he instantly replied that the Roman children had their dolls, which they offered up to Venus when they grew older, to support which he quoted a line from Persius.

We gain a more distinct view of Talleyrand's duplicity when told that, at Erfurt, where Napoleon met the Emperor of Russia to persuade him to join in overwhelming Austria, Talleyrand, the French Minister for Foreign Affairs, who all day long labored under Napoleon's vigilant eye to carry this object, used to visit

Alexander secretly at night and furnish him with every argument, reason, or pretence, which he could discover or invent against Napoleon's plan. Talleyrand himself told this to Croker, who repeats it in his memoirs.

All men, according to Napoleon, lose on a near view. He himself is no exception to his own rule, and the Napoleonic myth has been rudely shattered by the publication of memoirs filled with anecdotes which disclose the petulance, the rudeness, the ungovernable temper and uncurbed passions, the jealousy, meanness and mendacity of the conqueror of Europe. Chateaubriand, who wrote "*The Genius of Christianity*," was a man of impure conversation, and Young, the author of religious poems once popular, was a time-serving, place-hunting parson, "not at all the man of his own poetry."

But, on the other hand, men like to read of the weaknesses of the great, who are thus reduced to the level of mankind. This, fortunately, does not extend to fatal lapses from integrity, or calamities of fortune. The world will always offer to the blind Belisarius the obolus he is said to have begged at the city's gate. We would rather sit with Marius among the ruins of Carthage than with Tiberius on the rock of Capri. We accompany Aristides in his banishment, and join in the shouts which welcome Cicero's return from exile. We grieve to see Smollett perishing in a foreign land without resources from the works on which his publishers grew rich. We are touched by the sight of Cervantes lying in a dungeon and Camoëns yielding up his miserable life in a hospital.

Anecdotes may elevate as well as depress our opinion of men otherwise great. The well-known story of Goldsmith slipping into the mattress when he had given his blankets to the impoverished mother of five young children is matched by that of Lessing, in the depth of his poverty at Wolfenbüttel, taking home and supporting a man and a dog whom he had found starving on the highway. The weakness of much of Goldsmith's conduct is palliated, and our idea of the nobility of Lessing's character is heightened by these anecdotes which touch the heart of mankind.

We are by anecdotes made more nearly contemporaneous with great men than were most of their contemporaries. We are of the same time as the heroes of Plutarch, and have sat at the feet of Socrates and Plato. Demosthenes practising oratory with the

pebbles seems hardly more remote from us than young Gambetta shouting his seditious eloquence in a café of the Latin Quarter. In fact, our idea of certain men is confined to slight incidents or personal anecdotes. We never think of Diogenes without his tub, nor of Robert the Bruce without his spider. Even Alfred the Great is better known to us tending the cakes than founding Oxford.

Addison observes in the opening pages of the "Spectator" that a reader seldom peruses a book with pleasure until he knows "whether the writer be a black or a fair man, of a mild or choleric disposition, with other particulars of a like nature, that conduce very much to the right understanding of an author." He is careful, therefore, to give a detailed description of himself, and his remark is so just, even at this distance of time and space, that one can hardly open a daily newspaper without reading of a popular novelist like Tolstoi, that "he is a man of sixty, with iron-gray hair parted in the middle, sunburnt countenance, and ample gray beard and moustache." We also like to know the history and occasion of a literary work. We have not yet ceased to hear the chanting of the monks in the church of the Ara Coeli, which inspired Gibbon with the idea of writing "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire." "The Vicar of Wakefield" is more interesting to us when we are told that it rescued its author from arrest for debt, while "Rasselas" paid the funeral expenses of the author's mother. This interest in authors extends to their literary habits, and the scrupulous biographer will tell us that Buffon sat down to write with lace ruffles encircling his wrists; that Blackstone wrote his Commentaries with a bottle of port wine before him, and that Handel, as he daily took up the composition of the "Messiah," offered a prayer that he might worthily sing the praises of his Redeemer.

Anecdotes and the sayings of distinguished men illuminate such diverse characteristics as modesty, self-confidence and self-conceit. When Marshal Ney was ordered to await Lannes in storming the heights above Ulm, he exclaimed, "Glory is not to be divided!" and pushed on alone. General Grant would never have said that, for, when he was made general-in-chief, he wrote to General Sherman: "How far your execution of whatever has been given you to do entitles you to the reward I am receiving, you cannot know so well as I." Jefferson's modesty dictated his

reply to the welcome extended to him as Minister from the United States by the French Foreign Secretary: "You replace Mr. Franklin," said Vergennes. "I succeed him," answered the American Envoy, "no one could replace him." Pitt's generosity was equalled by his modesty, when he said of one of Fox's speeches, "Don't disparage it; nobody could have made it but himself;" and Burke thought it glory enough to have "rung the bell" to Dr. Johnson. It was not merely the desire to turn a compliment which prompted Dom Pedro of Brazil to enter Victor Hugo's *salon* with the words: "Reassure me, Sir, I am somewhat timid." It was the humility of royalty before genius, the humility of Charles V. picking up Titian's brush, or of Philip IV. proud of having painted a decoration in a portrait of Velasquez.

A confidence in one's own powers need not pass the limits of modesty, nor will the biographer mistake it for arrogance or conceit. When Burns turned up the mouse with his plowshare, his impulse was to kill it, but, checking himself, he said: "I'll make that mouse immortal." Thackeray's fervor and hearty frankness are pleasantly shown in his saying of a passage in "Vanity Fair:" "When I wrote that sentence I slapped my fist on the table and said, 'that's a touch of genius.'"

There is a self-confidence, which is modest and yet wins battles. General Taylor once called a council of war in face of the Mexicans, who were much his superiors in men and artillery. When an unanimous opinion had been given against fighting, the General quietly remarked, "I dismiss this council until after the battle," which he won.

Although it may be difficult in all cases to set the boundary between self-confidence and conceit, the following anecdotes reveal an amusing self-assurance: Some young students made a pilgrimage from Göttingen to Hamburg, where Klopstock was living in his old age, to ask the author of the "Messiah" the meaning of a passage in one of his works which they could not understand. He looked at it, and said that he could not then recollect what he meant when he wrote it, but he knew it was the finest thing he ever wrote, and they could not do better than to devote their lives to the discovery of its meaning. "When I used to go and sit with Mr. Rogers," says Mrs. Kemble, "I never asked him what I should read to him without his putting into my hands his own poems, which always lay by him on the table."

Wordsworth quoted no poetry but his own, and thought that if he had had "a mind to" he could have written Shakespeare's plays, which led Lamb to suggest that only the mind was lacking.

A felicitous phrase or a happy comparison may hit off character better than a page of elaborate description. At the moment of the elder Dumas's greatest literary productivity, Michelet said of him: "He is not a man; he is one of the forces of nature." No other comparison could make Frenchmen shudder as Mme. de Staël's characterization of Bonaparte as "Robespierre on horseback." Carlyle dubbed the latter "the sea-green incorruptible," but the sourness, jealousy, and deathly cunning of the man are summed up in the comparison which Louis Philippe, who saw him sitting silent at a dinner-party, made of him to a cat lapping vinegar. We do not protest when Carlyle calls Byron "a dandy of sorrows," or Bulwer "a dandiacal philosopher," for the former phrase packs into a nutshell Byron's affected and drawing-room misanthropy, and the second paints the "lispering, slender and effeminate tones of Bulwer," of whom a contemporary said that the novelist's idea of a wife or mistress was a woman "who would sit on a foot-stool at his feet, looking up proudly in his face, and only interrupting him to whisper that he was the handsomest creature on earth." The well-known traits which gave Bishop Wilberforce the nick-name of "Soapy Sam" are alluded to in a comparison which the late Sir F. Pollock made after hearing him reply at a public dinner to a distinguished foreign guest, that the Bishop reminded him of the dealing of a boa constrictor with a rabbit. He first oiled his antagonist all over, and then swallowed him whole at a mouthful.

The absence of the anecdotal element in the record of some men's lives makes them but the shadows of names. Livy draws a graphic picture of Hannibal, but it is only in outline; it needs the filling up of anecdotes to give it life. We may believe him when he says that there never was a genius more fitted for the two most opposing duties of obeying and commanding, and also when he speaks of the great Carthaginian's fearlessness, his ability to endure fatigue, heat or cold, want of food or sleep, and his simplicity of dress; but when are added excessive vices, inhuman cruelty, want of truthfulness, of reverence for the gods and sacred things, of respect for oaths, and of a sense of religion, without confirmatory anecdotes, we may regard this summing up as the

pedigree of a hostile partisan rather than the judgment of a judicious historian. To Juvenal's question, "Weigh Hannibal ; how many pounds will you find in that consummate general ?" the answer comes, he is one of the scarecrows of history. "Hannibal is at the gates !" has been a cry of terror since Cannæ.

For want of anecdotal illustration Dante wanders like a ghost through the corridors of history. Carlyle says that his biography is irrevocably lost to us, "an unimportant, wandering, sorrow-stricken man ; not much note was taken of him while he lived, and the most of that has vanished." Coleridge regretted that no friend of Rabelais had left an authentic account of him : "There never was a more plausible, and never, I am convinced, a less appropriate line, than Pope's 'Rabelais laughing in his easy chair.' Beyond doubt he was amongst the deepest as well as the boldest thinkers of his age."

Coming to our own time, Calhoun is hardly more than a name and an idea. Of him, as a man, very little is to be told. The Calhoun of the political stage, says Holst, his most recent biographer, "the Calhoun who ate and drank like other mortals, who laughed, chatted and sorrowed, who enjoyed life and battled with its great and small cares, is dead, and no one will be able to recall him to life, in the sense in which Webster and Clay still are and will remain and live as long as the American people cherish the memory of their great men." We have no anecdotes of the great Nullifier, the cast-iron man, as Miss Martineau calls him, "who looks as if he had never been born."

If anecdote plays so important a part in biography, and gives to history some of its most entertaining instruction, if our estimate of men is largely made up of little illustrative facts, it is important that these illustrations be correct, or our deductions from them will be wrong. "The disposition," says Froude, speaking of a certain scandal attaching to Julius Cæsar, "to believe evil of men who have risen a few degrees above their contemporaries is a feature of human nature as common as it is base ; and when to envy there are added fear and hatred malicious anecdotes spring up like mushrooms in a forcing-pit." Anecdotes should therefore be used with truthfulness, discretion and good taste.

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